

Tattoo History : Japan

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The earliest evidence of tattooing in Japan is found in the form of clay figurines which have faces painted or engraved to represent tattoo marks. The oldest figurines of this kind have been recovered from tombs dated 5,000 BC or older, and many other such figurines have been found in tombs dating from the second and third millennia BC. These figurines served as stand-ins for living individuals who symbolically accompanied the dead on their journey into the unknown, and it is believed that the tattoo marks had religious or magical significance.

The first written record of Japanese tattooing is found in a Chinese dynastic history compiled in 297 AD. According to this text, Japanese "men young and old, all tattoo their faces and decorate their bodies with designs." Japanese tattooing is also mentioned in other Chinese histories, but always in a negative context. The Chinese considered tattooing a sign of barbarism and used it only as a punishment.

By the seventh century the rulers of Japan had adopted much of the culture and attitudes of the Chinese, and as a result tattooing fell into official disfavor. The first record of tattooing as punishment in Japan is found in a Japanese history compiled in 720 AD. It reads: "The Emperor summoned before him Hamako, Muraji of Azumi, and commanded him saying: 'You plotted rebellion, and your offense is deserving of death. I will, however, exercise great bounty, and remitting the penalty of death, sentence you to be tattooed.'"

After the sixth century tattooing was widely used to identify criminals and outcasts. Outcasts were tattooed on the arms: a cross might be tattooed on the inner forearm, or a straight line on the outside of the forearm or on the upper arm. Criminals were marked with a variety of symbols which designated the places where the crimes were committed. In one region, the pictograph for "dog" was tattooed on the criminal's forehead. Other marks included such patterns as bars, crosses, double lines, and circles on the face and arms. Tattooing was reserved for those who had committed serious crimes, and individuals bearing tattoo marks were ostracized by their families and denied all participation in the life of the community. For the Japanese, who valued family membership and social position above all things, tattooing was particularly severe and terrible form of punishment.

Historical records indicate that during the seventeenth century penal tattooing was replaced by other forms of punishment. One reason for this is said to be that about that time decorative tattooing became popular, and criminals covered their penal tattoos with larger decorative patterns. This is also thought to be the historical origin of the association of tattooing with organized crime in Japan.

The earliest reports of decorative tattooing are found in works of fiction published toward the end of the seventeenth Century. In a popular erotic novel titled *The Life of an Amorous Man* (1682) it is reported that tattooed pledges of love were common among many classes, including courtesans, prostitutes, priests, and acolytes. One of the most popular pledges was the character inochi (life) together with the names of the lovers written in the Japanese phonetic syllabary. Priests and acolytes were sometimes tattooed with religious vows such as the Buddhist incantation *Namu Amida Butsu*.

Pictorial tattooing flourished during the eighteenth century in connection with the popular culture of Edo, as Tokyo was then called. Early in the eighteenth century a lively center of business activity, night life, and entertainment developed in the area of Edo around Nihonbashi (Japan Bridge). Here the great popular culture of Japan was born: Kabuki theater, Bunraku (puppet theater), and sumo wrestling. Here too writers, artists, and publishers became established, and in the nearby Yoshiwara district the geishas received their visitors.

Publishers needed illustrations for their novels, and theatrical producers needed advertisements for their plays. The art of the Japanese wood block print was developed to meet these needs. The subject matter was dictated by the publishers, and artists turned out images designed to advertise the talents of actors, courtesans, prostitutes, and wrestlers, together with illustrations of scenes from popular plays and novels. These prints were called *ukiyo-e*, or "pictures of the floating world." In them we see the passing parade of celebrities, fads, and fashions: images of things transient and illusory.

The development of the wood block print parallels, and had great influence on, the development of tattooing. Many of the *ukiyo-e* artists did whatever kind of work they could get, including sign painting, fabric design, and others forms of decorative art, including tattoo designs. In addition, tattooing was depicted in many wood block prints, which in turn influenced the style and fashions followed by those who designed tattoos.

Japan at that time was ruled by the authoritarian and repressive Tokugawa regime, which prohibited communication with the outside world and viewed any expression of personal liberty as a threat to the established order. Because of the ancient association between tattooing and criminal activity, the Tokugawa lawmakers outlawed tattooing on the grounds that it was "deleterious to public morals."

In spite of efforts by the government to suppress it, tattooing continued to flourish among firemen, laborers, and others at the lower end of the social scale. It was particularly favored by gangs of itinerant gamblers called yakuza. Members of these gangs were recruited from the underworld of outlaws, penniless peasants, laborers, and misfits who migrated to Edo in the hope of improving their lot. Although the yakuza engaged in a variety of semi-legal and illegal activities they saw themselves as champions of the common people and adhered to a strict code of honor which specifically prohibited crimes against the people such as rape and theft.

Like Samurai, they prided themselves on being able to endure pain and privation without flinching. And when loyalty required it, they were willing to sacrifice themselves by facing imprisonment or death to protect the gang.

The yakuza expressed these ideals in tattooing: because it was painful, it was proof of courage; because it was permanent, it was evidence of lifelong loyalty to the group; and because it was illegal, it made them forever outlaws.

About the middle of the eighteenth century the popularity of tattooing was stimulated by the translation into Japanese of a Chinese novel titled Suikoden, which tells of the adventures of a band of 108 outlaws who defied the corrupt rulers of China between 1117 and 1121. Because of its anti-authoritarian theme it became a symbol of resistance to the oppressive Tokugawa regime and was a perennial best seller for over a century.

Suikoden's influence on tattooing was due to the fact that many of the novel's heroes were extensively tattooed. One hero, Shishin, was decorated with nine intertwining dragons. Busho, who battled tigers, had a tiger tattooed on his back, while Rochoshin, the romantic hero, was decorated with flowers.

The Japanese versions of Suikoden were illustrated by a variety of artists, each of whom created prints in which he rendered new interpretations of the tattoos described in the novel. The tattoo designs in these prints were copied by tattoo artists, and as a result of their influence tattooing enjoyed great popularity and developed rapidly during the latter part of the eighteenth Century.

The most prolific and original illustrator of Suikoden was Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798-1861). When the first five plates of Kuniyoshi's Suikoden series were published as individual prints in 1827 they were an immediate success. In composition and draftsmanship they were far more dynamic and exciting than the work of his contemporaries. The contorted attitudes of the figures and the fierce expressions of the warriors combined to create a mood of conflict and melodrama which was uniquely suited to the Suikoden stories.

Encouraged by the success of his first five Suikoden plates, Kuniyoshi completed the series, devoting one plate to each of the 108 heroes. Kuniyoshi's Suikoden prints marked a turning point in his career and established his reputation as one of the leading ukiyoe artists of his day. Between 1827 and 1853, while at the same time doing much other work, Kuniyoshi continued to produce hundreds of variations on the Suikoden themes.

Kuniyoshi was a masterful draftsman and a great innovator. He worked in every style and attempted every subject known to Japanese printmaking, but he was at his best when portraying scenes of conflict, horror, and fantasy. He is best remembered for his warrior prints, which were designed to illustrate Japanese history and legends. These prints were immensely popular among his contemporaries and are highly prized by collectors today.

Little is known of Kuniyoshi's private life. His friends and contemporaries described him as a man of great warmth and imagination who loved his homeland, its history, and its legends. One of the most revealing accounts of his character is found in a police report written in 1853. Kuniyoshi had been charged with drawing pictures which contained seditious political satires. The police investigator reported that: "He appears vulgar, but he is large minded. He accepts any order from a publisher, if he likes him, regardless of the amount of money he is offered, but refuses it if he is not pleased with him, no matter how much he is willing to pay. He had rather a large income, so that he could afford to distribute it among his apprentices, and to have his wife and children fairly well dressed, but he himself had practically no spare clothing or extra suit, and was even in debt."

Kuniyoshi was one of the last of the great ukiyoe artists. When he died in 1861 the once mighty Tokugawa regime, which had ruled Japan for over two and a half centuries, was crumbling as the result of internal conflict and external pressures. During the 1850's the Tokugawa shoguns succumbed to the demands of the West and ended their long period of isolation. Japan's ports were opened to trade, an American consulate was set up, and a European colony was established in Yokohama.

As a result, Japanese culture and art were revolutionized at every level. The traditional styles and subject matter of ukiyoe suddenly appeared old fashioned. The Japanese public lost interest in images of Kabuki actors and beautiful ladies. Many ukiyoe artists tried to become modern by adopting western illustration techniques such as perspective, shadow, and three dimensional modeling.

In 1867 the last of the Tokugawa shoguns was deposed and after a brief civil war the emperor was restored to power.

The laws against tattooing were strictly enforced by the new rulers who feared that certain Japanese customs would seem barbaric and ridiculous to Westerners. Ironically, under the new laws, Japanese tattoo artists were allowed to tattoo foreigners but not Japanese. Some of the great tattoo masters established studios in Yokohama and did a brisk business tattooing foreign sailors. Their amazing skills were immediately recognized, and they attracted many distinguished clients, including the Duke of Clarence and his brother, the Duke of York (Later King George V), the Czarevich of Russia (Later Czar Nicholas II), and other European dignitaries.

The Japanese tattoo masters also continued to tattoo Japanese clients illegally, but after the middle of the nineteenth century their themes and techniques remained unchanged. Classical Japanese tattooing is limited to a repertoire of specific designs representing legendary heroes and religious motifs. These may be combined with certain symbolic animals and flowers and set off against a background of waves, clouds and lightning bolts.

The outstanding artistic quality of Japanese tattooing is due to the fact that the original designs were created by some of the greatest ukiyoe artists. The tattoo masters adapted and simplified these designs to make them suitable for tattooing, but did not invent new designs of their own.

The traditional Japanese tattoo differs from the Western tattoo in that it consists of a single major design which covers the back and extends onto the arms, legs and chest. Such a design is not chosen casually, but represents a major commitment of time, money and emotional energy. Each design is associated with an attribute such as courage, loyalty, devotion or obligation, and by being tattooed the individual symbolically makes these virtues part of him or herself.

Japanese tattooing today is still heavily influenced by the great traditions of the ukiyoe artists. Western techniques and modified western designs have been adopted by some of the younger artists, but many laborers and yakuza still wear the classical full body designs created by Kuniyoshi and his contemporaries.

The following selection is taken from "Memoirs of a Tattooist" by George Burchett, and is quoted here by kind permission of his son, Leslie Burchett:

The "Victory" dropped anchor in Kobe, Japan, on a fine summer's day in 1889. This port, then the gateway to Japan, had known what it was to have the fleets of Britain, America, France and Holland standing off it, with decks cleared for action. By dint of this encouragement, the deliberations between the Occidental Powers and the representatives of Imperial Tycoon had been brought to a satisfactory conclusion and the gateway had been opened. By the time I arrived only thirty years had passed since Britain and America had wrung the treaty out of Nippon's rulers which allowed Europeans to settle and open the harbours of Nagasaki, Yokohama and Kobe to foreign ships.

The fantastic tumult of Eastern ports was not new to me. But I expected something new in Japan. I was disillusioned. Kobe and, as I discovered later, Yokohama and Tokyo were less "oriental" and outlandish than the British ports in China and Straits Settlements. The streets of these Japanese cities seemed to have been westernized overnight. They were broad and straight. Most houses were built of stone and had many stories. There were imposing, dull buildings for banks, offices and shops which would not have looked out of place in the City of London. There was Japanese quarter in Kobe, of course, but it was not as much in evidence as in Yokohama, which preserved the Eastern look to a greater extent. However, Kobe Harbour itself was then one of the most beautiful in the East. A panorama of countless islands spread out in all directions from the bay, and it was on these islands that the Japanese lived, in tiny houses, built of paper and thin wood. The houses huddled together in little groups, as if to make up for their flimsy weakness by facing the elements together. Their curly roofs looked jaunty and some of the houses overhung the sea. But more people lived on board the junks and sampans with which the bay seemed to be alive.

Over this scene the sun set in wonderful glory. I did not have to wait to see some of Japan's art close-to before I realized what had inspired for centuries the tattoos I had admired. As I looked out to the islands and their delicate silhouettes I was, in my boyish way, moved for perhaps the first time in my life by pure beauty, and I also felt a kind of sadness which I did not understand. Now, I think, it simply meant that I realized that there are some things in life which will always keep on the other side of the shop window. In my case, I would never be able to achieve anything so lovely as the view from H.M.S. "Victory" over Kobe with my own hand.

In the streets of Japan there was a mass of colour. Everyone seemed in a hurry and one had to be agile to keep out of the way of the jinrickshas, the fleet-footed coolies. But I found a corner from which to watch undisturbed and I shall always remember the Japanese girls tripping along in their brightly coloured kimonos, with brilliant reds, greens, yellows and violets. Even the children were dressed in the most extraordinary style. They looked like little cardinals with long robes of scarlet, violet and black, all padded out so that they looked dumpy and very, very serious. In this respect it was as well that my first glimpse of Japan was at Kobe and not Yokohama and Tokyo, where the taste in dress was much quieter. There they wore dark blue and rarely relieved it with any contrasting colour.

But once again it was not until the evening that Japan really came up to my high hopes. Then the lanterns were hung from the shop fronts and the men and women carried more glowing lanterns as they walked through the streets. Possibly my introduction to mulled sake stimulated my imagination, but I returned to the "Victory" like a man who has just visited fairyland. Needless to say, I did not reveal such sloppy thoughts to my shipmates whose requirements of a port were not

so delicate.

We were given shore leave at Yokohama and I was able to visit the greatest tattooist there has ever been. Or, to be more accurate, I was able to visit his house ...

"Hori" is the ancient Japanese title for all tattooists. They are, or were, more like a priesthood than anything else, possessing deft skill which, to my mind, bordered on the supernatural. Not the least wonderful aspect of their talent was the speed at which they worked. But no Hori had surpassed the delicacy of line, the precise detail, and, above all, the glowing colours and subtle shading created by Hori Chyo.

Perhaps only an oriental, with his patience and devotion, which is religious in character, could get so near perfection. I knew that Western tattooists, however skilled and gifted, were only imitators of an art which had been cultivated in Japan for 2000 years. Hori Chyo was the inheritor and custodian of this tradition and its secrets which had been handed down for generation after generation.

I decided that somehow, I had to visit the workshops of this master and, if humanly possible, meet him myself. Chyo had his studio at the Esplanade, a westernized thoroughfare. But his house was a Japanese bungalow with an elegant and peaceful forecourt where his servants and pupils greeted the visitor. I was overawed.

Tattooing had just been forbidden in Japan by an Imperial decree in one of a series of measures designed to westernize the Land of the Rising Sun. Forbidden, that is, for Japanese skins, but not so for foreigners. They were free to patronize the horis. This was not logical in the western sense, and I do not think it pleased the Japanese, who continued to be tattooed in secret. But the result was that Chyo was compelled to cultivate western clientele and, as I, a humble rating, stood in the forecourt, I felt embarrassed by the steady procession of officers and wealthy business men who were arriving for their costly appointments with the famous tattooist.

Nevertheless, I was treated with the utmost courtesy. One of the pupils departed bearing my stammered request to meet the master. I did not admit that I had never seen any work by Chyo as it was always placed on bodies beyond my rank and station at that time. As I waited I was offered cigarettes and a bowl containing a sort of fish soup. This was given to all visitors, the soup being kept in a large vessel on a bamboo pedestal. For those who fancied it, there was also cold tea, hot water and mulled sake.

I was gingerly testing the fish soup when another pupil came up and asked, in broken English, whether I would like to be attended to by himself or another young hori. Obviously he suspected that I could not afford the master's stiff fee. When I told him that I wished to meet the master because I was an amateur tattooist, he smiled, bowed, and left me alone.

At last I was called forward. In my eagerness I nearly collided, at the entrance, with a Lieutenant, R.N., who gave me a dirty look when I sprang to attention. He acknowledged my salute and departed without saying a word.

Then I saw Hori Chyo. He was sitting on one of the cushions which were laid out all over the room. He smiled and beckoned me forward.

He was a small, slightly built man, with a short, silvery goatee beard. He looked more like a Chinese mandarin than a Japanese samurai. He was wearing a magnificent yellow silk kimono with rich embroidery showing dragons and chrysanthemums. So this was the man who, in his youth, had studied with the legendary Hori Yasu of Kyoto, and had then taken the art of Japanese on to unsurpassed glory.

In excellent English he said he had heard that I was a tattooist and that he was honoured by my call. Hastily I explained that I was just a beginner and that it was the greatest event of my life to be allowed to meet him. This was no attempt at Oriental courtesy on my part. Chyo asked me whether I would like to be tattooed, and I had to explain that I had only a little money and that I could not spend more than fifty yen. It was quite enough for me to spend, as it equaled about five shillings.

He smiled again and said that he would be happy to make a small design as a souvenir of our meeting. But, he added, I might be interested in watching him at work, and he asked me whether I would allow him to ask in another client who had an appointment. I readily agreed and a fat Frenchman, who had arrived aboard a large French merchantman which I had seen in port, was ushered in by a pupil. He was asked to strip and lie on the cushions. Chyo bent over him and, after a short, whispered conversation - apparently the master also spoke French - Chyo murmured a word or two to the pupils kneeling by him.

They all had tattoo needles in their hands and jars containing coloured dyes on small lacquer trays. To my astonishment I discovered that the needles were in fact thin ivory sticks, the size of a pencil, carved and brightly painted with designs. Chyo neither showed his customer a book of designs nor did he look at one himself. Rapidly he applied the ivory sticks, changing them again and again, using points of varying thickness for the different lines he was so quickly puncturing. In the meantime, several other customers arrived, were told by the pupils to stretch out on the cushions and rugs, and Chyo

darted from one to another, while his pupils continued to work, following his outlines.

When at last the master approached me, he asked: "Would you like a little lizard on your arm?" I just nodded, unable to utter a word. A pupil gave him an ivory stick, and he punctured my skin so gently and rapidly that I hardly felt it at all, dipping the stick into jars which another pupil held in front of him. He changed them again and again. Within a few moments I had a wonderful small lizard darting up my forearm, green, brown and yellow, with finely shaded scales and red eyes and tongue.

Before I realized that he had finished, Chyo was already attending another man across the room. My audience was at an end. A pupil wiped my forearm with a pleasantly smelling wet piece of silk or paper and said: "Will the honourable gentleman now be so good as to tender a note of fifty yen?" This I did, bowing now myself as deeply to the little fellow as he did to me. I tried to catch Chyo's eye to bow to him to express my gratitude, but the master was far too busy to see me.

During my shore leave I went three times more to Chyo's bungalow, just to sit in the forecourt and to snatch a glance at his work or even that of his pupils. Although I was never allowed to enter the sanctum again, I could watch some of the pupils tattooing some of the British and American sailors in the forecourt, apparently at cut rates. These pupils, some boys of my own age or even younger (one told me he was fourteen), were tattooists in their own right and as quick as Chyo.

I was told that Chyo was a very rich man. He had tattooed many royal personages, including the Duke of Clarence and the Duke of York, who later became King George V, when the two brothers served as midshipmen aboard H.M.S. "Bacchante", which visited Yokohama in 1882. The two dukes had been on a world tour which lasted nearly three years, and had come from Australia to Japan, where they were received with great ceremony by the Mikado. The Duke of Clarence was eighteen, his brother sixteen months younger. That the two young men were allowed to visit Hori Chyo puzzled many of the informed people in London, because the princes were in the charge of Canon Dalton, their tutor (the father of Dr. Hugh Dalton, who was later a famous Labour Party politician). However, as I later heard, it was the wish of King Edward VII that his sons should acquire some small adornment from the hand of the great Japanese master. I have forgotten what design he gave the Duke of Clarence, who died from a chill in 1892 at only twenty-eight years of age, but I have had the privilege of seeing Chyo's masterpiece, a dragon, on his royal brother's forearm.

Chyo had also tattooed the Czarevitch of Russia, later Czar Nicholas II during the Russian state visit to Tokyo some years after. When I visited the master his eyesight must have been already failing; indeed, I was told he had only one good eye left. The other had become blind, probably from the constant strain caused by executing the extremely minute details of his designs. But his eye trouble did not prevent him from accepting an invitation to New York. The story was that he had been accused of tattooing a Japanese samurai whom the Mikado disliked. To spite the nobleman, the Emperor arranged that Chyo should be prosecuted by the police for tattooing a subject of the Emperor. The hori staunchly denied the offense, but he was fined. The fine was small, but Chyo's indignation about this treatment was so great he announced that he was leaving the country. He was enabled to do so by an American millionaire, Mr. Max Bandel, of New York, who had acquired some beautiful tattoos during a stay in Yokohama. Mr. Bandel invited Chyo to New York at a retainer of ¥2,400 a year, which would be in addition to any fees Chyo cared to charge individual customers. Chyo worked for several years in New York, and he and his American pupils were responsible for the designs of some of the monumental works executed for Barnum upon the skins of Mr. and Mrs. Williams and Frank and Emma de Burgh. Frank had a reproduction of Lenoardo da Vinci's "Last Supper", Emma a representation of the crucifixion. While these two pieces were not by Japanese artists, Chyo's influence upon the American tattooists was obvious in the great detail of the picture.